

The
Mask
of
ARIBELLA

* ANNA *
HOUGHTON



Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Anna Houghton 2020
Cover illustration © Paola Escobar

First published in Great Britain in 2020
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White

Cover illustration by Paola Escobar

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-912626-10-6

eISBN 978-1-912626-58-8

To Matt and Sue

‘Magic is believing in yourself. If you can do that, you can make anything happen.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



Aribella and her friend Theo sat side by side on the deck of the fishing boat, looking out across the lagoon to their island home. Already Burano's brightly coloured cottages were dissolving into the distance. It was the last morning of September, the day before Aribella's thirteenth birthday.

'Aren't you going to help?' Theo's papa called, struggling with the sail. 'The others are leaving us behind.'

Theo rolled his eyes but sprang to his feet.

Aribella stayed where she was. Girls were bad luck on boats, so fishing folk said. Thankfully, Theo's papa wasn't as superstitious as the rest of them and allowed Aribella on board, but he drew the line at her handling the sail. Since he was already doing her a kindness, she

did not complain. All the same, she watched Theo keenly as he wrestled with the ropes, trying to learn as much as she could.

The dirty old sail whipped about the creaking mast, then billowed and caught. Theo let out a small whoop of triumph.

‘*Bravo!*’ his papa called, angling the rudder.

The ancient fishing boat began to move smoothly across the dark water, gathering momentum, and soon joined the small fleet sailing towards the main island of Venice.

Sleepy-eyed boys regarded Aribella warily from the decks of the other boats. She dropped her gaze, used to these sorts of looks.

Theo flopped back down beside her. ‘Still don’t get why you wanna come,’ he said, dipping the toe of his boot into the passing water. ‘I *have* to, but you – you could spend the morning exploring rooftops, or playing with Luna, or swimming, or—’

‘I like coming,’ Aribella interrupted, wrapping her cloak round her body.

Theo snorted. ‘No one *likes* getting covered in fish guts.’

‘I don’t mind it,’ she insisted.

‘Suit yourself,’ Theo scoffed, but he was smiling.

The lagoon and sky lightened to orange and pink.

The world was soft and hazy, like the edge of a dream. Other fishermen called greetings to Theo's papa, which he returned cheerily. Aribella felt a tug of yearning as she looked up at his open, bearded face. He was so bright and full of life, so unlike her father.

Aribella loved helping at the fish market – the *pescheria* – because, just for a short while, it made her feel that she was part of something, that she belonged. And though she felt guilty for admitting it, she relished the excuse to be out of Papa's gloomy house, where he sat, day after day, making his beautiful lace in silent mourning. It had been ten years since Mama passed but Papa had never recovered. Aribella had been an infant and could barely remember her. She worried about Papa constantly, except at the market, where she was so busy she could forget for a while – though she'd feel bad about that afterwards.

Theo leant back on his elbows and closed his eyes. Aribella kept hers open, gazing at the other islands as they floated by. There was Sant' Erasmo, dotted with farms that produced fruit and vegetables for the whole city. Some Burano boys had once tried to steal artichokes there and been chased off with sticks. Lots more boats were setting off from the island's jetty, on their way to market. Next was Murano, the renowned glass-blowers' island, and then San Michele, the cemetery island.

Gulls cried on the horizon and the sun slid out of the lagoon. Thin trails of pale blue ribboned the sky and the main island of Venice came dazzlingly into view.

Piazza San Marco was already full of crowds. The rising sun shone off the red brick of the bell tower, the *campanile*, and the pale walls of the Doge's palace gleamed. It was low and rectangular, decorated like the most beautiful cake, with a pattern of stone arches that were as intricate as Papa's lace. Rows of dark windows looked out towards the lagoon like the eyeholes of a Venetian mask.

As their boat got closer, she made out the carving of the head of a lion in the palace wall, its jaws open. The Lion's Mouth. She was too far away to read the inscription engraved underneath, but she knew what it said. Even children who couldn't read knew: *Per Denontie Segrete* – 'For Secret Accusations'.

Parents warned naughty children that their names would be put into the Lion's Mouth and the Doge's guards would come and punish them . . . Of course it wasn't really for disobedient children. Anyone seen as dangerous could have their name placed in the Lion's Mouth at any time, by *anyone*. No one knew what happened to them after the guards came. Some said they were thrown into the palace prison. Others, that they were hanged between the columns in Piazza San

Marco in the dead of night . . .

One thing was for sure: you didn't want to find out. Aribella shivered.

'Hello? Aribella?' Theo waved a hand in front of her eyes.

'Sorry. I was miles away.' She smiled. 'What were you saying?'

But whatever it was, was forgotten, because the next instant Theo jumped to his feet, making the boat rock, and pointed, shouting, '*Santo cielo!* It's the Doge.'

Sure enough, sweeping ahead of them, moving far faster than the fishing boats, was a fleet of elegant gondolas, steered by masked palace guards. And seated in the middle gondola, recognizable by his snow-white robes and glittering diamond mask, was the Doge of Venice.

Aribella jumped to her feet too. The Doge had not been seen outside the palace for months and had been ill for years. A cheer rose up as he raised a gloved hand and waved. He had always been generous to the poor, at least before he fell ill.

'Good to see him up and about,' said Theo's papa.

The Doge turned towards them, and his jewelled mask flashed blindingly in the sun so that Aribella had to close her eyes. When she opened them again, the Doge had turned back towards the palace.

‘Do you think he wears the mask to hide how poorly he is?’ she asked Theo.

Theo shrugged. ‘Maybe. I remember seeing him when I was little and I swear he didn’t wear a mask then. You weren’t even born,’ he teased, adding, ‘He probably just likes it. If I owned a mask with that many jewels on, I’d wear it all the time too. Though it’s not his mask I’d want—’

‘It’s the gondolas,’ Aribella finished.

Theo smiled. ‘Just look at them – they’re so fast! Do you know that they’re made from several different types of wood? Oak, cherry, elm, pine . . .’

As a matter of fact, Aribella did know because Theo had already told her – many times.

‘And they’re deliberately lop-sided to counter-balance the weight of the rower at the back,’ he continued. ‘And that curved bit at the front – that’s called the *ferro*. Isn’t it, Papa? Oh, I’d love to own a gondola one day.’ Theo sighed wistfully.

Theo’s papa rolled his eyes and ignored him.

‘Maybe you will,’ Aribella said encouragingly.

Theo only sighed again and Aribella regretted her words. She knew what Theo was thinking: only those born into rich Venetian families got to own gondolas. Theo would be a fisherman all his life, like his father and grandfather before him. Still, at least he knew his

place in the world. Aribella envied the clearness of his path. Her own was as murky as canal water.

The palace fleet reached the jetty. The Doge stepped from his gondola and disappeared through an archway into the palace, followed by his guards. A few fishermen let out groans of disappointment to see him go, calling out wishes for his good health. The fishing boats swung away from the palace, moved past the *campanile* and entered the Grand Canal, the main waterway of the city, which snaked in an S-shaped curve through the main island. This morning, as on all mornings except Sundays, it was a sparkling ribbon of activity, packed with trading boats laden with wares: bright tomatoes and flashing sardines among them.

More traders called greetings to Theo's papa.

'*Ciao! Buongiorno!*' Theo's papa called back, and Aribella glowed with pride just to be on the same boat.

She gazed up at the grand palazzos either side of the Grand Canal that were the homes of Venice's richest families. The flower-covered balconies, beautiful jetties and arched entrances were a world away from the higgledy-piggledy cottages on Burano. Many were worthy rivals to the Doge's palace itself, and the sun slid from window to window as if it couldn't decide which to stay in. Aribella and Theo spent many morning journeys fantasizing about what it might be like to

live in a palazzo. Theo always teased Aribella about her favourite, which was halfway along the Grand Canal, just before the Rialto Bridge. The orange-and-purple stained-glass doors were smashed and boarded up, and the canary-yellow paint was peeling. It was a wonder it hadn't been torn down, but Aribella was glad it hadn't. There was just something about it that she liked.

The world was suddenly cold and dark as their fishing boat slipped into the shadow beneath the Rialto Bridge. Aribella and Theo played their usual game of touching the underside with their fingers. It had seemed so tricky when they were young and small, but now they could both reach the slimy bricks with ease.

It reminded Aribella that her days following Theo to the market were numbered. Thirteen was considered an adult by some. Theo was going to be a fisherman but what would she become? A lacemaker like Papa? She was clumsy and awful at sewing, but how else would she and Papa survive when his eyesight worsened, as it surely would?

She pushed these worries from her mind as they emerged back into the bright sunshine on the other side of the bridge. As usual, she caught the smell of the *pescheria* – a pungent, salty odour that she'd grown to love – even before she saw the colourful mishmash of

stalls crammed under the arches of the loggia.

Theo's papa docked the boat on the traders' jetty and went ahead to set up the stall, leaving Aribella and Theo to unload the fish. The crates were half-empty today, just as they had been all year. The recent decline of fish in the lagoon was making every family on Burano anxious. No one could afford to lose money.

'Bad catch again this week,' Theo muttered.

'Everyone's in the same boat,' a nearby fisherman remarked. 'Must be a change in the swell or something.'

'Pah!' called another, his expression dark. 'It's been eight months of this! I'll tell you the real reason. Fortune teller said a blood moon's comin'. And you know what that means.'

'What?' asked the first fisherman.

'It's a bad omen. Very bad indeed.' The second man gave Aribella a suspicious look she pretended not to see.